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SOLWAY FORD

## SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY

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COLLECTED POEMS, 1905-25

The Golden Room

Hazards

Islands

Fuel

*Published by the Oxford University Press*

Coming and Going

The Alert

Challenge

The Searchlights

The Outpost

**SOLWAY FORD**  
and other poems

by  
**WILFRID GIBSON**

a selection made by  
**CHARLES WILLIAMS**

**FABER AND FABER**  
24 Russell Square  
London

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# CONTENTS

|                              |               |
|------------------------------|---------------|
| <i>From Fires</i>            |               |
| Flannan Isle                 | <i>page</i> 7 |
| The Money                    | 11            |
| The Dancing Seal             | 16            |
| <i>From Thoroughfares</i>    |               |
| Solway Ford                  | 19            |
| Geraniums                    | 22            |
| The Lodging-House            | 23            |
| The Ice                      | 24            |
| Lines                        | 25            |
| Wheels                       | 26            |
| <i>From Battle</i>           |               |
| The Return                   | 29            |
| Comrades                     | 30            |
| His Mate                     | 31            |
| <i>From Friends</i>          |               |
| Trees                        | 32            |
| The Ice-Cart                 | 33            |
| <i>From Chambers</i>         |               |
| The Parrots                  | 35            |
| Worlds                       | 36            |
| Elegy                        | 37            |
| <i>From In Khaki</i>         |               |
| The Conscript                | 38            |
| Ragtime                      | 39            |
| Camouflage                   | 40            |
| <i>From I heard a Sailor</i> |               |
| The New Oilskins             | 41            |



|                              |                |
|------------------------------|----------------|
| The Wreck                    | <i>page</i> 42 |
| The Blind-worm               | 43             |
| Adrift                       | 44             |
| New Moon                     | 46             |
| The Wishing Well             | 50             |
| <i>From Beauty for Ashes</i> |                |
| The Buried Camp              | 51             |
| <i>From The Golden Room</i>  |                |
| Whistling Wind               | 52             |
| The Saw-Pit                  | 53             |
| The Immortal                 | 54             |
| The Broken Chain             | 55             |
| Venus di Milo                | 57             |
| The Threat                   | 58             |
| The Last Shift               | 59             |
| The Cherry-Wife              | 60             |
| Golden Plover                | 61             |
| The Golden Room              | 62             |
| <i>From Hazards</i>          |                |
| So early in the Morning      | 64             |
| The Quaker Botanist          | 65             |
| <i>From Islands</i>          |                |
| Before the Wind              | 66             |
| The Feathers                 | 67             |
| The Unseen Rider             | 69             |
| The Unseen Housemate         | 70             |
| Out of the Air               | 71             |
| The Edge of the Tide         | 72             |
| <i>From English (1944)</i>   |                |
| The Three Poets              | 73             |

# I

## FLANNAN ISLE

*Though three men dwell on Flannan Isle  
To keep the lamp alight,  
As we steered under the lee we caught  
No glimmer through the night.*

A passing ship at dawn had brought  
The news, and quickly we set sail  
To find out what strange thing might ail  
The keepers of the deep-sea light.

The winter day broke blue and bright  
With glancing sun and glancing spray  
While over the swell our boat made way,  
As gallant as a gull in flight.

But as we neared the lonely Isle  
And looked up at the naked height,  
And saw the lighthouse towering white  
With blinded lantern that all night  
Had never shot a spark  
Of comfort through the dark,  
So ghostly in the cold sunlight  
It seemed that we were struck the while  
With wonder all too dread for words.  
And, as into the tiny creek  
We stole, beneath the hanging crag  
We saw three queer black ugly birds—  
Too big by far in my belief  
For cormorant or shag—  
Like seamen sitting bolt-upright

Upon a half-tide reef:  
But as we neared they plunged from sight  
Without a sound or spirt of white.

And still too mazed to speak,  
We landed and made fast the boat  
And climbed the track in single file,  
Each wishing he were safe afloat  
On any sea, however far,  
So it be far from Flannan Isle:  
And still we seemed to climb and climb  
As though we'd lost all count of time  
And so must climb for evermore;  
Yet all too soon we reached the door—  
The black sun-blistered lighthouse door  
That gaped for us ajar.

As on the threshold for a spell  
We paused, we seemed to breathe the smell  
Of limewash and of tar,  
Familiar as our daily breath,  
As though 'twere some strange scent of death;  
And so yet wondering side by side  
We stood a moment still tongue-tied,  
And each with black foreboding eyed  
The door ere we should fling it wide  
To leave the sunlight for the gloom:  
Till, plucking courage up, at last  
Hard on each other's heels we passed  
Into the living-room.

Yet as we crowded through the door  
We only saw a table spread  
For dinner, meat and cheese and bread,

But all untouched and no one there;  
As though when they sat down to eat,  
Ere they could even taste,  
Alarm had come and they in haste  
Had risen and left the bread and meat,  
For at the table-head a chair  
Lay tumbled on the floor.

We listened, but we only heard  
The feeble cheeping of a bird  
That starved upon its perch;  
And, listening still, without a word  
We set about our hopeless search.  
We hunted high, we hunted low,  
And soon ransacked the empty house;  
Then over the Island to and fro  
We ranged, to listen and to look  
In every cranny, cleft or nook  
That might have hid a bird or mouse;  
But though we searched from shore to shore  
We found no sign in any place,  
And soon again stood face to face  
Before the gaping door,  
And stole into the room once more  
As frightened children steal.  
Ay, though we hunted high and low  
And hunted everywhere,  
Of the three men's fate we found no trace  
Of any kind in any place  
But a door ajar and an untouched meal  
And an overtoppled chair.

And as we listened in the gloom  
Of that forsaken living-room—

And saw again the quiet face  
That filled with light that shameful place,  
Touched with the tender youthful grace  
Death brings the broken and outworn  
To comfort kind hearts left to mourn.

And as I stood the sum they'd found  
Rang with a queer familiar ring  
Of some uncouth, uncanny sound  
Heard in dark ages underground,  
And *four-pound-seventeen-and-five*  
Through all my body seemed to sing,  
Without recalling anything  
To help me, strive as I might strive.

But as I stumbled down the stair  
Into the alley's gloom and stench—  
A whiff of burning oil  
That took me unaware<sup>r</sup>—  
And I knew all there was to tell;  
And though the rain in torrents fell  
I walked on heedless through the drench . .  
And all the while I seemed to sit  
Upon a tub in Lancel pit,  
And in the candle-light to see  
John Askerton, a 'deputy'  
Who paused awhile to talk with me,  
His kind face glistening black with toil.

*'Twas here I found him dead beside  
His engine. All the other men  
Were up, for things were slack just then,  
And I'd one foot upon the cage,  
When all at once I caught a smell*

*Of burning. Even as I turned  
To see what it could be that burned,  
The seam behind was choked with stife:  
And so I dropped on hands and knees  
And crawled along the gallery  
Beneath the smoke, that I might see  
What ailed; and as I crept half-blind,  
With smarting eyes and breath awheeze,  
I scarcely knew what I should find.  
At times I thought I'd never know. . . .  
It seemed already quite an age  
Since I'd set out. . . . I felt as though  
I had been crawling all my life  
Beneath that stifling cloud of smoke  
That clung about me fit to choke:  
And when at last I'd struggled here  
'Twas long ere I could see things clear—  
That he was lying here, and he  
Was dead, and burning like a tree—  
A tree-trunk soaked in oil. . . . No doubt  
The engine had caught fire somehow,  
And when he tried to put it out  
His greasy clothes had caught—and now!*

*As fine a lad as you could see—  
And such a lad for singing—I  
Had heard him when I worked hard-by;  
And often quiet I would sit  
To hear him singing in the pit,  
As if his heart knew naught of it,  
And life was nothing but a song.*

*He'd not been working with us long,  
And little of his ways I knew;*

*But when I'd got him up at last  
And he was lying in the shed,  
The sweet song silent in his breast,  
And there was nothing more to do,  
The notion came into my head  
That he had always been well dressed.  
And seemed a neat and thrifty lad . . .  
And lived in lodgings . . . so maybe  
Would carry on him all he had.  
So back into the cage I stepped  
And when it reached the bottom crept  
Along the gallery again,  
And in the dust where he had lain  
I rummaged until I found all  
That from his burning pockets fell:  
And when it seemed there was no more  
I thought how, happy and alive,  
And recking naught that might befall,  
He too, for all that I could tell,  
Just where I stood had reckoned o'er  
That four-pound-seventeen-and-five.*

*Ay, like enough—for soon I heard  
That in a week he'd looked to wed.  
He'd meant to give the girl that night  
The money to buy furniture.  
She came and watched till morning-light  
Beside the body in the shed,  
Then rose, and took without a word  
The money he had left for her.*

. . . . .  
Then as I wandered through the rain  
I seemed to stand in awe again  
Beside that lonely garret-bed.

And it was good to think the dead  
Had known the wealth she would not spend  
To keep a little while alive—  
His four-pound-seventeen-and-five—  
Would buy her house-room in the end.



### 3

#### THE DANCING SEAL

When we were building Skua Light—  
The first men who had lived a night  
Upon that deep-sea Isle,  
As soon as chisel touched the stone  
The friendly seals would come ashore  
And sit and watch us all the while,  
As if they'd not seen men before,  
And so, poor beasts, had never known  
Men had the heart to do them harm.  
They'd little cause to feel alarm  
With us, for we were glad to find  
Some friendliness in that strange sea,  
Only too pleased to let them be  
And sit as long as they'd a mind  
To watch us, for their eyes were kind—  
Like women's eyes it seemed to me.  
So hour on hour they sat: I think  
They liked to hear the chisels' clink,  
And when the boy sang loud and clear  
They scrambled closer in to hear,  
And if he whistled sweet and shrill  
The queer beasts shuffled nearer still,  
But every sleek and sheeny skin  
Was mad to hear his violin.

When, work all over for the day,  
He'd take his fiddle down and play  
His merry tunes beside the sea,  
Their eyes grew brighter and more bright  
And burned and twinkled merrily;

And, as I watched them one still night  
And saw their eager sparkling eyes,  
I felt those lively seals would rise,  
Some shiny night ere he could know,  
And dance about him heel and toe  
Unto the fiddle's heady tune.

And at the rising of the moon,  
Half-daft, I took my stand before  
A young seal lying on the shore  
And called on her to dance with me:  
And it seemed hardly strange when she  
Stood up before me suddenly  
And shed her black and sheeny skin  
And smiled, all eager to begin . . .  
And I was dancing heel and toe  
With a young maiden white as snow  
Unto a crazy violin.

We danced beneath the dancing moon  
All night beside the dancing sea  
With tripping toes and skipping heels,  
And all about us friendly seals  
Like Christian folk were dancing reels  
Unto the fiddle's endless tune  
That kept on spinning merrily  
As though it never meant to stop;  
And never once the snow-white maid  
A moment stayed  
To take a breath,  
Though I was fit to drop;  
And while those wild eyes challenged me  
I knew as well as well could be  
I must keep step with that young girl,  
Though we should dance to death.

Then with a skirl  
The fiddle broke:  
The moon went out:  
The sea stopped dead:  
And in a twinkling all the rout  
Of dancing folk had fled . . .  
And in the chill bleak dawn I woke  
Upon the naked rock alone.

They've brought me far from Skua Isle . . .  
I laugh to think they do not know  
That, as all day I chip the stone  
Among my fellows here inland,  
I smell the sea-wrack on the shore . . .  
And see her snowy tossing hand,  
And meet again her merry smile . . .  
And dream I'm dancing all the while,  
I'm dancing ever, heel and toe,  
With a seal-maiden white as snow,  
On that moonshiny island-strand  
For ever and for evermore.

## 4

### SOLWAY FORD

He greets you with a smile from friendly eyes,  
But never speaks nor rises from his bed:  
Beneath the green night of the sea he lies,  
The whole world's waters weighing on his head.

The empty wain made slowly over the sand,  
And he with hands in pockets by the side  
Was trudging, deep in dream, the while he scanned  
With blue unseeing eyes the far-off tide,  
When, stumbling in a hole, with startled neigh  
His young horse reared and, snatching at the rein,  
He slipped: the wheels crushed on him as he lay;  
Then, tilting over him, the lumbering wain  
Turned turtle, as the plunging beast broke free  
And made for home; and, pinioned and half-dead,  
He lay and listened to the far-off sea  
And seemed to hear it surging overhead  
Already, though 'twas full an hour or more  
Until high-tide when Solway's shining flood  
Should sweep the shallow firth from shore to shore.  
He felt a salty tingle in his blood  
And seemed to stifle, drowning: then again  
He knew that he must lie a lingering while  
Before the sea might close upon his pain,  
Although the advancing waves had scarce a mile  
To travel, creeping nearer inch by inch  
With little runs and sallies over the sand.  
Cooped in the dark, he felt his body flinch  
From each cold wave as it drew nearer hand.  
He saw the froth of each oncoming crest

And felt the tugging of the ebb and flow  
And waves already breaking over his breast—  
Though still far-off they murmured faint and low,  
Yet creeping nearer inch by inch, and now  
He felt the cold drench of the drowning wave  
And the salt cold of death on lips and brow,  
And sank and sank . . . while still, as in a grave,  
In the close dark beneath the crushing cart  
He lay and listened to the far-off sea.  
Wave after wave was knocking at his heart  
And swishing, swishing, swishing ceaselessly  
About the wain—cool waves that never reached  
His cracking lips to slake his hell-hot thirst . . .  
Shrill in his ears a startled barn-owl screeched . . .  
He smelt the smell of oil-cake . . . when there burst  
Through the big barn's wide-open door the sea—  
The whole sea sweeping on him with a roar . . .  
He clutched a falling rafter dizzily . . .  
Then sank through drowning deeps to rise no more.

Down, ever down, a hundred years he sank  
Through cold green death, ten thousand fathom  
    deep.  
His fiery lips deep draughts of cold sea drank  
That filled his body with strange icy sleep  
Until he felt no longer that numb ache,  
The dead-weight lifted from his legs at last—  
And yet he gazed with wondering eyes awake  
Up the green glassy gloom through which he passed,  
And saw far overhead the keels of ships  
Grow small and smaller, dwindling out of sight,  
And watched the bubbles rising from his lips,  
And silver salmon swimming in green night,  
And queer big golden bream with scarlet fins

And emerald eyes and fiery-flashing tails,  
Enormous eels with purple-spotted skins,  
And mammoth unknown fish with sapphire scales  
That bore down on him with red jaws agape  
Like yawning furnaces of blinding heat;  
And when it seemed to him as though escape  
From those hell-mouths were hopeless, his bare feet  
Touched bottom, and he lay down in his place  
Among the dreamless legion of the drowned,  
The calm of deeps unsounded on his face  
And calm within his heart, while all around  
Upon the midmost ocean's crystal floor  
The naked bodies of dead seamen lay,  
Dropped sheer and clean from hubbub brawl and  
    roar  
To peace too deep for any tide to sway.

. . . . .

The little waves were lapping round the cart  
Already when they rescued him from death.  
Life cannot touch the quiet of his heart  
To joy or sorrow as, with easy breath  
And smiling lips, upon his back he lies  
And never speaks or rises from his bed,  
Gazing through those green glooms with happy eyes  
While gold and sapphire fish swim overhead.

## 5

### GERANIUMS

Stuck in a bottle on the window-sill,  
In the cold gaslight burning gaily red  
Against the luminous blue of London night,  
These flowers are mine—while somewhere out of sight  
In some black-throated alley's stench and heat,  
Oblivious of the racket of the street,  
A poor old weary woman lies in bed.

Broken with lust and drink, blear-eyed and ill,  
Her battered bonnet nodding on her head,  
From a dark door she clutched my sleeve and said:  
*I've sold no bunch to-day, nor touched a bite . . .*  
*Son, buy sixpenn'orth, and 'twill mean a bed.*

So, blazing gaily red  
Against the luminous deeps  
Of starless London night  
They burn for my delight,  
While somewhere snug in bed  
A worn old woman sleeps.

And yet to-morrow will these blooms be dead  
With all their lively beauty, and to-morrow  
May end the light lusts and the heavy sorrow  
Of that old body with the nodding head.  
The last oath muttered, the last pint drained deep,  
She'll sink, as Cleopatra sank, to sleep,  
Nor need to barter blossoms for a bed.

## THE LODGING-HOUSE

When up the fretful creaking stair  
 From floor to floor        ,  
 I creep  
 On tiptoe, lest I wake from their first beauty-sleep  
 The unknown lodgers, lying layer on layer  
 In the packed house from roof to basement  
 Behind each landing's unseen door,  
 The well-known steps are strangely steep  
 And the old stairway seems to soar,  
 For my amazement  
 Hung in air,  
 Flight on flight  
 Through pitchy night,  
 Evermore and evermore.

And when at last I stand outside  
 My garret-door, I hardly dare  
 To open it  
 Lest, when I fling it wide,  
 With candle lit  
 And reading in my only chair,  
 I find myself already there . . .

And so must crawl back down the sheer black pit  
 Of Hell's own stair,  
 Past lodgers sleeping layer on layer,  
 To seek a home I know not where.



## THE ICE

Her day out from the workhouse-ward, she stands,  
A grey-haired woman decent and precise,  
With prim black bonnet and neat paisley shawl,  
Among the other children by the stall,  
And with grave relish eats a penny ice.

To wizened toothless gums with quaking hands  
She holds it, shuddering with delicious cold,  
Nor heeds the jeering laughter of young men—  
The happiest, in her innocence, of all:  
For, while their insolent youth must soon grow old,  
She, who's been old, is now a child again.

## 8

## LINES

*Addressed to the Spectre of an Elderly Gentleman, recently demised,  
Whom the Author had once observed performing a Benevo-  
lent Office in the Vicinity of Holborn, W.C.*

I saw you, seated on a horse's head  
While the blaspheming carter cut the traces,  
Obese, white-waistcoated, and newly fed,  
Through bland indifferent monocle surveying  
The gaping circle of indifferent faces.

And now the news has come that you are dead  
I see you, while they cut the tangled traces,  
On your own hearse's fallen horse's head,  
Through bland indifferent monocle surveying  
The unseeing circle of funereal faces.

And then great darkness and a clanging bell,  
Clanging beneath the hollow vault of hell  
Aglow like burnished copper, and a roar  
Of wheels and wheels and wheels for evermore,  
As engine after engine crashes by  
With clank and rattle under that red sky,  
Dropping a train of burning coals behind  
That scorch his eyeballs till he lies half-blind,  
Smouldering to cinder in a vasty night  
Of wheeling worlds and stars in whirring flight,  
And suns that blaze in thunderous fury on  
For ever and for ever, yet are gone  
Ere he can gasp to see them . . . head to heels,  
Slung round a monstrous red-hot hub that wheels  
Across infinity with spokes of fire  
That dwindle slowly till the shrinking tyre  
Is clamped like aching ice about his head. . . .

He smells clean acid smells, and safe in bed  
He wakens in a lime-washed ward, to hear  
Somebody moaning almost in his ear,  
And knows that it's himself that moans; and then,  
Battling his way back to the world of men,  
He sees with leaden eyelids opening wide  
His young wife gravely knitting by his side.

## 10

### THE RETURN

He went, and he was gay to go;  
And I smiled on him as he went—  
My boy! 'Twas well he didn't know  
My darkest dread, or what it meant—

Just what it meant to smile and smile  
And let my son go cheerily—  
My son . . . and wondering all the while  
What stranger would come back to me.

## 11

### COMRADES

As I was marching in Flanders  
A ghost kept step with me—  
Kept step with me and chuckled  
And muttered ceaselessly—

*Once I too marched in Flanders,  
The very spit of you,  
And just a hundred years since,  
To fall at Waterloo.*

*They buried me in Flanders  
Upon the field of blood,  
And long I've lain forgotten  
Deep in the Flemish mud.*

*But now you march in Flanders,  
The very spit of me,  
To the ending of the day's march  
I'll bear you company.*

## 12

### HIS MATE

*Hi-diddle-diddle,  
The cat and the fiddle . . .*

I raised my head  
And saw him seated on a heap of dead,  
Yelling the nursery-tune,  
Grimacing at the moon . . .

*And the cow jumped over the moon.  
The little dog laughed to see such sport,  
And the dish ran away with the spoon.*

And as he stopped to snigger,  
I struggled to my knees and pulled the trigger.

# 13

## TREES

(For Lascelles Abercrombie)

The flames half-lit the cavernous mystery  
Of the wide-branching elm that loomed profound  
In Summer leafage, towering from the ground  
To midnight stars in tranced serenity,  
As, under the quiet of that ageless tree,  
In a rapt dreaming ring we lay around  
The flickering faggots, once again spellbound  
By old words moving in new harmony.

And, as you read, arose before our eyes  
A rarer tree of visionary birth  
To brave the weather of eternal skies,  
Crested with stars, yet, rooted deep in earth,  
Its legend-haunted branches laced with gleams  
Of friendly firelight and the light of dreams.

## 14

### THE ICE-CART

Perched on my city office-stool  
I watched with envy while a cool  
And lucky carter handled ice . . .  
And I was wandering in a trice  
Far from the grey and grimy heat  
Of that intolerable street  
O'er sapphire berg and emerald floe  
Beneath the still cold ruby glow  
Of everlasting Polar night,  
Bewildered by the queer half-light,  
Until I stumbled unawares  
Upon a creek where big white bears  
Plunged headlong down with flourished heels  
And floundered after shining seals  
Through shivering seas of blinding blue.  
And, as I watched them, ere I knew  
I'd stripped and I was swimming too  
Among the seal-pack, young and hale,  
And thrusting on with threshing tail,  
With twist and twirl and sudden leap  
Through crackling ice and salty deep,  
Diving and doubling with my kind  
Until at last we left behind  
Those big white blundering bulks of death,  
And lay at length with panting breath  
Upon a far untravelled floe  
Beneath a gentle drift of snow—  
Snow drifting gently fine and white  
Out of the endless Polar night,  
Falling and falling evermore



Upon that far untravelled shore  
Till I was buried fathoms deep  
Beneath that cold white drifting sleep—  
Sleep, drifting deep,  
Deep drifting sleep. . . .

The carter cracked a sudden whip:  
I clutched my stool with startled grip,  
Awakening to the grimy heat  
Of that intolerable street.

## 15

### THE PARROTS

Somewhere, somewhere I've seen,  
But where or when I'll never know,  
Three parrots of shrill green  
With crests of shriller scarlet flying  
Out of black cedars as the sun was dying  
Against cold peaks of snow.

From what forgotten life  
Of other worlds I cannot tell  
Flashes that screeching strife:  
Yet the shrill colour and the strident crying  
Sing through my blood and set my heart replying  
And jangling like a bell.

## 16

### WORLDS

Through the pale forest of tall bracken-stalks  
Whose interwoven fronds, a jade-green sky,  
Above me glimmer infinitely high,  
Towards my giant hand a beetle walks  
In glistening emerald mail; and as I lie  
Watching his progress through huge grassy blades  
And over pebble boulders, my own world fades  
And shrinks to the vision of a beetle's eye.

Within that forest world of twilit green,  
Ambushed with unknown perils, one endless day  
I travel down the beetle-trail, between  
Huge glossy boles, through green infinity . . .  
Till flashes a glimpse of blue waves through the bracken  
asway,  
And my world is again a tumult of windy sea.

## 17

### ELEGY

Stars that fall through crystal skies,  
Winds that sink in songless death,  
Are the light within man's eyes  
And his body's breath.

For a little while he burns  
Fitfully, a windy spark,  
Ere his shrivelled soul returns  
To the outer dark.

## 18

### THE CONSCRIPT

Indifferent, flippant, earnest, but all bored,  
The doctors sit in the glare of electric light  
Watching the endless stream of naked white  
Bodies of men for whom their hasty award  
Means life or death maybe, or the living death  
Of mangled limbs, blind eyes, or a darkened brain;  
And the chairman, as his monocle falls again,  
Pronounces each doom with easy indifferent breath.

Then suddenly I shudder as I see  
A young man stand before them wearily,  
Cadaverous as one already dead;  
But still they stare untroubled as he stands  
With arms outstretched and drooping thorn-crowned  
head,  
The nail-marks glowing in his feet and hands.

## 19

### RAGTIME

A minx in khaki struts the limelit boards:  
With false moustache, set smirk, and ogling eyes  
And straddling legs and swinging hips she tries  
To swagger it like a soldier, while the chords  
Of rampant ragtime jangle, clash and clatter,  
And over the brassy blare and drumming din  
She strains to squirt her squeaky notes and thin  
Spirtle of sniggering lascivious patter.

Then out into the jostling Strand I turn,  
And down a dark lane to the quiet river,  
One stream of silver under the full moon,<sup>7</sup>  
And think of how cold searchlights flare and burn  
Over dank trenches where men crouch and shiver,  
Humming, to keep their hearts up, that same tune.

## CAMOUFLAGE

Out of the puddle of his mind there poured  
A sickly trickle of obscenities,  
Till some chance word of mine waked into life  
Within his heart half-frozen memories:

And then with shining eyes he talked of home,  
His wife and their one bairn, a little lass,  
And all her darling ways; but suddenly  
I saw the radiance from his blue eyes pass

As, slouching up to us, another chum  
Cursed the lancejack with casual blasphemies;  
And once again from that slack mouth outpoured  
A sickly trickle of obscenities.

## 21

### THE NEW OILSKINS

*And him in his new oilskins too!*  
Was all she said  
When up the brae and to her door  
We bore her dead.

We laid the corpse the sea had stripped  
Upon the bed,  
And left the widow to her watch  
Beside the dead.

*And him in his new oilskins too!*  
Was all she said:  
Yet when we sailed again at dawn  
The wife was dead.



## 22

### THE WRECK

She broke amidships: as the hull  
Parted, the boxes from the hold  
Poured crashing out, and she went down  
Into a sea of ruddy gold:

And in a twinkling I was dropped  
Into the swallow and the strife  
Of surf, to battle in a swirl  
Of floating oranges for life.

## 23

### THE BLIND-WORM

When I stroked his cold dry skin,  
His black tongue flickered out and in.

*Flicker your black tongue three times three  
If my true love is safe at sea.*

I stroked him thrice and thrice, and then  
I stroked his cold skin twice again:

And each time out the quick tongue came,  
And flickered like a wee black flame.

At three times three, my fingers shook:  
I shut my eyes, afraid to look;

And when I opened them the snake  
Had vanished in the withered brake.

## ADRIFT

We heaved the body overboard—  
The tenth man who had died:  
Then gasping side by side  
Askance each other eyed.

The sea was glass, the sky was brass—  
The boat a white-hot grid  
Beneath that brazen lid  
As to the thwarts we slid

Each eyeing still the other, each  
Knowing the other knew  
The one thought of the two—  
Who should heave over who?

Which of the twain left out of twelve  
On that dead sea accurst  
Should first give in and first  
Fall to the fiend of thirst?

Which of the twain be left to heave  
A corpse of skin and bone  
O'erboard to sink like stone;  
And then drop back alone

Yet living to the thwarts, alone  
On blistering boards to lie  
Unburied 'neath that sky  
Of brass, eternally

Thirsting for bottomless long draughts  
Of home-brewed bitter beer,  
Icy and amber-clear . . .  
The barmaid holds so near,

So near the lips, then snatches back  
Just as you stoop to drink,  
And lets fall with a clink  
And splash into the sink . . .

When suddenly his eyes burned red:  
He rose and with a cry  
Plunged overboard, and I,  
Who somehow could not die,

Was left—to come once more to port . . .  
And in my bed again  
Heave over ten dead men  
Night after night, and then

Watch jealously again while he  
Dives headlong—mad to leap  
With him into death's deep  
And everlasting sleep!

## 25

### NEW MOON

#### I

New moon, *he said*—the first  
I've ever seen through glass:  
Well, let us hope the worst  
Won't come to pass.

A wheen new moons I've seen,  
For I am ninety-three,  
And never aught between  
The moon and me.

She's bonnie still, *said he*,  
Though something sharp and cold.  
We'll see what we shall see  
When she is old.

## NEW MOON

## II

A skirling squeaky piping—  
 Tweedledee, tweedledee,  
 And the drubbing of a drum,  
 Tum . . . tum . . .  
 And the niggers on the quay  
 Stole my young heart from the sea;  
 And I leapt ashore and shuffled with them,  
 Ruffled with them, scuffled with them,  
 Prancing to that piping—  
 Tweedledee, tweedledee,  
 To the piping sharp and thin  
 That gets underneath the skin,  
 And the drubbing of the drum,  
 Tum . . . tum . . .  
 That rumbles through the midriff like the roll of  
     kingdom-come—  
 Tum . . . tum . . . tum . . .

And I couldn't face my messmates  
 When they'd seen me foot it there  
 To the drubbing of the drum—  
 Tum . . . tum . . .  
 Galumphing like a bear  
 Mother-naked to the air  
 With a lot of fantee stumping niggers,  
 Clumping belly-thumping niggers—  
 Lost to England, Home, and Beauty  
 By the piping sharp and thin

That gets underneath the skin,  
And the drubbing of the drum—  
Tum . . . tum . . .  
That rumbles through the midriff like the roll of  
kingdom-come—  
Tum . . . tum . . . tum . . .

## 27

### NEW MOON

#### III

Night without a break  
Brooded overhead  
As we lay awake  
On our bracken-bed.

So I shut my eyes,  
Burdened by the weight  
Of those starless skies  
And our luckless fate.

But as I lay still  
She sat up in bed:  
*Turn your coppers, Bill—*  
*The new moon!* she said.



## THE WISHING-WELL

Lass, I've heard tell  
That in this well  
The Roman folk would chuck,  
When things were going ill with them  
A coin or so for luck.

*And their great Wall's a ruin on the fell,  
And naught of their camp living but this well!*

Ay, lass, that's so;  
And yet although  
Their rampart could not stand,  
Who knows but luck meant getting back  
Again to their own land?

*So, you've chucked our last copper in the well?  
Well, what luck is or isn't, who can tell!*

## THE BURIED CAMP

Fear not: the dead are dead,  
And fallen pomp and power  
Leave no pale ghosts to prowl  
Above their earthly bed:  
'Twas no dead Roman but a living owl  
That startled us beside the ruined tower.

*And yet, that beak, those eyes  
That blazed out from the night!  
Surely 'twas Caesar's soul  
That with sharp stabbing cries  
Swept by, as through the buried camp we stole,  
Spurring dead cohorts on to one last fight.*

## WHISTLING WIND

Like unleashed lightning, Whistling Wind,  
His snowy hound, flashed down the track,  
Leaving the throng of grey and black  
A dozen yards behind:

And, as she raced, it seemed his heart,  
No longer prisoned in his breast,  
A white streak leading all the rest—  
Ay, even from the start,

Hot on the heels of the slick hare  
That never glanced to left or right,  
A dazzling wildfire of delight,  
Flashed through the whistling air!

## 31

### THE SAW-PIT

Into the pit the sawdust fell;  
And the wind flicked it in his face:  
And Paul could grin! All very well  
For him to grin; and, in Paul's place,  
Like enough he'd be cocky, too.  
Ah well, ah well, you never knew—

Never! And Paul was getting on:  
Old Paul was little more than skin  
And bone: and, when old Paul was gone,  
He'd be top-sawyer; and could grin  
To see the blinding sawdust fall,  
Half-smothering Paul's grandson, Paul!

## THE IMMORTAL

Writhen and grey as an old shank of heather,  
Tending his flock, I met John Armitage,  
Who bleated at me like an old bell-wether—  
*Your grandfather and I were of an age.*

Though through my very bones the snell wind whistled,  
Or, so it seemed, on that storm-scoured fell,  
Still those old toothless jaws, so lank and grizzled,  
Piped—*And your father, too, I knew him well.*

And, as he talked, the life within me dwindled . . .  
And I, the wraith of one whose day was done,  
Stood watching him, still hale, with blue eyes kindled,  
Telling the same tale to my unborn son.

## THE BROKEN CHAIN

A chain snapped; and the crane broke loose, and swung  
 Its great beam suddenly across the pier,  
 Backwards and forwards in a mad career.  
 John only dodged it just in time; and flung  
 Himself flat on the stones, as it lunged clear  
 Over the sea: when, lifting up his eyes,  
 Startled, he saw that young Dick Dagleish clung  
 Desperately to the beam, half-crazed with fear;  
 And, any instant, might let go his hold,  
 And crash upon the rocks, or drop to drown.  
 Swiftly the beam returned; and, as it passed  
 Over John once again, he leapt upright,  
 And caught the broken chain; and swung with it,  
 Backwards and forwards, with the boy's wild cries  
 Tearing his heart, and turning his blood cold—  
 Backwards and forwards still, now dangling sheer  
 Over the rocks, now over the full tide—  
 Backwards and forwards still, from side to side—  
 Backwards and forwards, until John, at last,  
 Managed to pull himself up on the beam;  
 And seize the crazy lad, and hold him down;  
 Though now he struggled, scared into a fit:  
 And, as the mad boy let out scream on scream,  
 John pinioned him, although the lad's teeth bit  
 His finger to the bone—grumbling at him:  
*You would then, would you, looney? You would drown*  
*The two of us? But I don't mean to swim—*  
*Not, if I know it!* And John held him there,  
 Securely gripped; while through the dizzy air  
 The beam still carried them, until the force

Of its momentum slackened; and, at length,  
Slowly and creakingly, it came to rest  
Over the pier-head: and they helped John down,  
Hugging the lad, now senseless, to his breast.  
But, as his feet touched earth, John's giant strength  
Failed him; and he fell prone . . .

And, all that night,  
He swung behind a comet, in its course  
Across the void, clutching its fiery tail,  
That lashed across infinity; and felt  
Suns whirring past him in their flaming flight;  
Until he lost his grip; and tumbled sheer  
Into the bottomless abyss of hell.  
Down, down and down, and ever down he fell,  
Clutching at phantom chains, without avail—  
Chain after glittering chain, whose links of light  
Eluded him, or at his touch would melt . . .  
Until, still in an icy sweat of fear,  
He waked in his own room, where someone knelt,  
Sobbing, beside his bed. He touched her hair;  
And knew that it was Bessie, sobbing there.

And then John started up; and stood upright,  
Swaying and muttering; and, all in vain,  
She tried to keep him quiet in his bed.  
*Nay, woman, I can't idle here, he said,  
With work to do. And I must set the crane  
To rights at once. It needs a stronger chain.*

## VENUS DI MILO

The gipsy mother could afford no stone,  
Her little lassie's nameless grave to mark,  
Her baby Nita, lying there alone,  
Lapped in the old earth's bosom, cold and dark.

But one day in an old-junkshop she found,  
And bought with her last pence, a statuette:  
And so, returning to the burial-ground,  
Upon the tiny new-made grave she set

Venus di Milo: and still love's high Queen,  
Born of the beauty of the breaking wave,  
In marble immortality serene  
Keeps vigil o'er the gipsy baby's grave.



## THE THREAT

I caught the glint of the moon on a levelled barrel  
From the tail of my eye;  
And as I swung round on my heel the hour seemed striking  
For me to die:

But the gun must have burst in the hands of the clumsy  
beggar—  
For he fell dead  
As the shot rang out; and I found him there in the  
spinney,  
With shattered head:

And the heart was still, that a second since was furious  
With death for me;  
While again in my side my heart, that had stopped a  
moment,  
Beat merrily.

And then, in my marrowbones, as I stood beside him,  
I felt death's chill;  
And I heard a ghostly voice at my shoulder whisper—  
*Next time, I kill!*

## THE LAST SHIFT

You're surely early home, lad? Your shift's not over?

*Ay, my shift is over, lassie, my last shift.*

Last shift? You're telling me, you've stopped working!

*Ay, I'll never hew again in Hellgut Drift.*

Your face is gey and white, lad—your cyes are queer and  
wild-like:

Something's happened to you on your last shift!

*Something! Ay, lass, I've just slipped home to tell you*

*I'm straked beneath a ton of coal in Hellgut Drift.*

## THE CHERRY-WIFE

It wasn't me he married, but my orchard;  
And so I keep him tinkling at the bell  
From the first glint of daylight until sunset,  
To scare the birds, and serve him right as well.

The birds in June are mighty early risers:  
And he must rise at dawn, if he's to sell  
A single cherry: and, on rainy mornings,  
How I lie chuckling at the tinkling bell!

## GOLDEN PLOVER

Darkness has filled the deep ravine;  
 Yet, down in that black cleft, unseen,  
 The restless guillemot still yell  
 Like fiends in some old fabled Hell.

And, standing on the crumbling brink  
 Of the black pit—he seems to sink  
 Into some chasm of old fears,  
 Where, in remote forgotten years  
 Of early consciousness, his mind,  
 Groping through night, had wandered blind;  
 Yet with the sense of hearing keen  
 To the shrill threat of the unseen  
 Voices that shrieked on every side,  
 And the dread whisper of the tide,  
 Close on his heels—the clutching sea  
 That should devour him presently,  
 Unless, from out that pit of night  
 And dinning dark, a gleam of light  
 Should rescue him . . .

He hears the cry

Of golden plover in the sky—  
 Of golden plover in Spring flight  
 Northward: and suddenly in the night  
 A rift appears; and into sight,  
 Between torn edges of black cloud,  
 The new moon sails: and all the loud  
 Abhorrent voices of old fears  
 Sink back into forgotten years.

## THE GOLDEN ROOM

(To G.)

Do you remember that still summer evening  
When, in the cosy cream-washed living-room  
Of The Old Nailshop, we all talked and laughed—  
Our neighbours from The Gallows, Catherine  
And Lascelles Abercrombie; Rupert Brooke;  
Elinor and Robert Frost, living a while  
At Little Iddens, who'd brought over with them  
Helen and Edward Thomas? In the lamplight  
We talked and laughed; but, for the most part, listened  
While Robert Frost kept on and on and on,  
In his slow New England fashion, for our delight,  
Holding us with shrewd turns and racy quips,  
And the rare twinkle of his grave blue eyes?

We sat there in the lamplight, while the day  
Died from rose-latticed casements, and the plovers  
Called over the low meadows, till the owls  
Answered them from the elms, we sat and talked—

Now, a quick flash from Abercrombie; now,  
A murmured dry half-heard aside from Thomas;  
Now, a clear laughing word from Brooke; and then  
Again Frost's rich and ripe philosophy,  
That had the body and tang of good draught-cider,  
And poured as clear a stream.

'Twas in July  
Of nineteen-fourteen that we sat and talked:  
Then August brought the war, and scattered us.

Now, on the crest of an Aegean isle,  
Brooke sleeps, and dreams of England: Thomas lies  
'Neath Vimy Ridge, where he, among his fellows,  
Died, just as life had touched his lips to song.

And nigh as ruthlessly has life divided  
Us who survive; for Abercrombie toils  
In a black Northern town, beneath the glower  
Of hanging smoke; and in America  
Frost farms once more; and, far from The Old Nailshop  
We sojourn by the Western sea.

And yet,  
Was it for nothing that the little room,  
All golden in the lamplight, thrilled with golden  
Laughter from hearts of friends that summer night?  
Darkness has fallen on it; and the shadow  
May never more be lifted from the hearts  
That went through those black years of war, and live.

And still, whenever men and women gather  
For talk and laughter on a summer night,  
Shall not that lamp rekindle; and the room  
Glow once again alive with light and laughter;  
And, like a singing star in time's abyss,  
Burn golden-hearted through oblivion?

1925

## SO EARLY IN THE MORNING

Rising at three o'clock the summer through  
To raise his garden-stuff for marketing,  
Punctually on the stroke in winter too  
He wakens, though there isn't anything,  
Until the daylight comes, for him to do.

So, handy by his bed he keeps his flute  
And book of airs; and in the candlelight  
Forgets awhile his vegetables and fruit  
In making music, while, without, the night  
Lies sleeping still, save for the lone owl's hoot.

*Toot-tootle-too*, he pipes his melody;  
*Tu-whit-tu-whoo*, the owl's shrill answer rings  
Upon the frosty air, now from a tree,  
Now scouring the dark on soundless wings:  
And so they keep it up, the owl and he.

## THE QUAKER BOTANIST

My chief delight, said William Dawson, is gathering moss  
in gentle rain—  
And he, whose heart for things to cherish on earth was  
never at a loss,  
Surely is wandering down some heavenly, and not-too-  
unlike-Hertford, lane  
Through soft celestial sunny showers, gathering paradisaal  
moss.



## BEFORE THE WIND

Aboard her craft once more, she breathed the air  
Of hard-won freedom: standing by to take  
Her trick at the helm, she watched green-water break  
Over the bow; and, as she took the wheel,  
Thrilled to its tug and wrench and the mate's 'Take care  
She doesn't gybe!' and thrilled again to feel  
The exultant sea-lift as the slicing keel  
Cut clean the flaking foamheads—body and mind  
Braced, mettled and strung tensely as the taut  
Mainsheet, to keep the ship before the wind,  
Enraptured to escape from brooding, caught  
Into the conflict of the wind and wave  
That shook her soul free from the thrall of thought,  
The dire obsession of futility  
That for so long had darkened all her life:  
And now she felt at last that she was free,  
Recovering in the elemental strife  
Her own identity and the zeal to save  
Her soul alive. Clear-eyed, with tossing hair  
And lifted brow, she breathed the sharp salt air,  
Nerved to an urgency that held her mind  
Steady on even keel, and proud to find  
Her seamanship sufficing still to keep  
Through the blind smother and welter of the deep  
The cutter running well before the wind.

## THE FEATHERS

Stridently cutting through  
The diamond flame of heat  
That holds the city in a glassy trance,  
The searching chanting of the muezzin sings  
Above the empty street  
From the slim minaret whose lance  
Of ivory pierces the dense blue,  
Where on still planing wings  
A solitary kite,  
Dark as charred paper floating in the light,  
Hangs hovering; when, as the call to prayer  
Sinks to a murmur, suddenly a white  
And startled pigeon flutters through the air  
In tumbling flight,  
And from the glittering height  
Death drops on unheard wings;  
And as again the dark kite swings  
Into the blue, a snowy flutter  
Of feathers falls in the deserted square,  
And a lean mongrel snoozing in the gutter  
Opens one eye and blinks  
In the white glare,  
Licking warm blood-drops from his muzzle, and sinks  
Again in deep  
Undreaming sleep:  
But the child peering through the latticed shutter  
Shivers with sudden cold  
To see life stricken in mid-air  
And heaven darken with the wings of death,  
And instantly grown old

Already feels the cruel talons tear  
His fluttering heart, and cowers with sobbing breath,  
Eyeing with frightened stare  
The scatter of white feathers lying there.

## THE UNSEEN RIDER

The roads blocked deep with drifts, when Helen died,  
We had to cross the fells, scoured clean of snow,  
To reach the little churchyard in the dale,  
Her coffin strapped across the saddlebow  
Of her young chestnut filly, Heatherbell,  
Bridling and restive under the deadweight  
Of that strange burden; when down Elkridgeside  
There swirled a scathing blast of blinding hail;  
And the young lad who held the bridle-rein,  
Stumbling among the tussocks, slipped and fell;  
And Heatherbell broke loose and plunged and reared;  
Then, as the scared lad snatched at her in vain,  
She dashed across the fell and disappeared  
In the dense flurry of the squall: too late  
We cantered after her; and never again  
Was she or the dread burden that she bore  
Seen by a living soul. Yet oft at night  
The muffled drumming hoofs of Heatherbell  
Are heard by lonely shepherds on the fell  
As, high of heart as she would ride of old,  
Helen, who that wild day in death's despite  
Escaped the durance of the churchyard mould,  
Ranges the fells she loved for evermore.

## THE UNSEEN HOUSEMATE

A shuffling step across the upper floor,  
Loose-fitting slippers flapping down the stair,  
The handle turns and stealthily the door  
Swings on its hinges, and there's no-one there—  
No-one my eyes can see; but, happen, he  
Who dwelt here ere I came had keener sight—  
At least I wonder what he saw the night  
He hanged himself from the old apple-tree.

## OUT OF THE AIR

No song-bird will ever  
Come to my call;  
But when I am thinking  
Of nothing at all,  
Thinking of nothing  
And going nowhere,  
Out of the air  
The crystal notes fall.

Yeats, with his shock of grey hair, slowly pacing  
The platform, waiting for the Irish Mail  
At Euston, his old dark eyes still aflame  
With the unquenchable genius that burned  
Fed with an ever fuller sense of life  
Ever to fierier intensity  
As he grew old; then Binyon on that day  
In the third year of the world-war's renewal  
When Summer rain drenched round his downland home  
And we together sat by the log-fire,  
And I, remembering that earlier time  
In days of peace when first I heard him read  
In his snug book-lined room in Cowley Street  
While over night-hushed Westminster the stars  
Kept watch above a yet unshattered world,  
Now listened once again with blood that pulsed  
Responsive to the rhythm and the rapture  
As he to me with undiminished vigour  
Read his last poems in the resonant voice  
Whose organ-tones still echo in my heart.

And, in these dire and dreadful days, as I  
Musc on these memories, I long once more to be  
That stripling sitting in a Holborn teashop  
With heart that kindles to the eloquence  
Of those three poets who have left so rich  
A heritage, still in the prime of life  
Discoursing on the theme that was the breath  
And being of their earthly pilgrimage.











